

Where Do Teens Turn for Support and What Does it Mean for Those Who Want to Help Them?

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By Drew Fidler and Ari Handel

Peer relationships during the adolescent years can be characterized in a variety of ways. Driven by a fluid definition of friendship, the search for identity, and the elusive craving for acceptance, teens consistently enter and exit relationships that fall across the scale of appropriate and healthy. As they navigate this cacophony of emotion, these peer relationships also present opportunities for support and resiliency. In fact, recent survey findings support the important role that peers can play as youth-serving organizations (YSOs) seek to address the mental health needs of their communities.

Over the past ten months of disruption and isolation, BBYO has seen adolescents support each other in remarkable ways. Teens have reached out to BBYO staff to get help for friends experiencing suicidal thoughts, struggling with anxiety, harming themselves, restricting food intake or using substances. Teen leaders have created virtual programs for their peers on

mental health and wellness that teach healthy coping skills. Teen-led support networks have emerged using BBYO's On Demand platform to simply bring teens together to talk about issues of loneliness and grief. .

Knowing that for the first time in history teens around the world have gone through a traumatic experience together, BBYO recently conducted a survey to better understand how the needs and interests of this audience might be changing as a result of the pandemic. We were especially interested in understanding teen mental health needs and came across an interesting finding. When asked who they seek support from when stressed, upset, anxious, or experiencing challenges, **79 percent of teens responded that they seek out their friends first**, followed by 64 percent who turn to family members. But the drop-off after that is huge. Only 22 percent of teens turn to mental health or medical professionals and a mere one percent seek out clergy. **Most concerning, however, is that 11 percent said they had no one to turn to.**

This important finding indicates that teens are overwhelmingly turning to their peers in challenging times, and their peers, in turn, have a tremendous opportunity to help. Of course, this places a great deal of responsibility on teens to be able to identify mental health red flags, appropriately engage in sensitive conversations, and know where to turn to for assistance. After spending the last several months certifying all our professionals and many volunteer advisors who work directly with teens in Youth Mental Health First Aid, BBYO is now working to put these skills directly in the hands of teens.

Utilizing *Teen Mental Health First Aid* training, BBYO is experimenting with a peer approach which will enlist and train a group of teens who can recognize early signs of trouble and know where to turn for help. By equipping teen "Peer Advocates" with the skills to help others, these advocates are also gaining the knowledge and skills needed to foster their own wellness. Initially, Peer Advocates will take part in a year-long cohort on a community-by-community basis where they can share experiences with and continue to learn from each other and experts in the field of adolescent mental health and resiliency.

It is our expectation that YSOs will continue to be at the center of teens' coping and healing which will undoubtedly take place over the next several years. YSOs have always provided safe and supportive environments where teens feel comfortable sharing the nuances of their adolescent experiences. These environments build a sense of belonging while helping young people develop confidence and character. These *Positive Childhood Experiences* (PCEs) act as another protective layer for teens combatting mental health issues.

As BBYO builds out strategies and practices to engage in what is expected to be unprecedented interest from teens to convene in all sorts of settings, our approach to wellness will initially focus on three key areas:

1. **Maximize the number of people who know when to raise a red flag.**

As stated previously, in addition to training its professionals and many volunteer advisors in Youth Mental Health First Aid, BBYO will seek to engage teens themselves as Peer Advocates so that they recognize red flags and know what to do when they see them. To do this, BBYO will participate in a pilot with the National Council for Behavioral Health in administering the virtual Teen Mental Health First Aid curriculum. Knowing that teens are most likely to turn to each other in times of need, this training is going to become an increasingly frontline defense. Furthermore, sharing support opportunities with parents and building their understanding and partnership will only expand the safety net. Our *Parent Advisory Council*, a national team of parents helping to grow the BBYO Movement, will provide guidance and networking in this work.

2. Establish wellness support teams on a community-by-community basis.

The mental health challenges teens now face require attention from the best and brightest social workers, counselors, and organizations. Rather than having individual organizations hire their own social workers, we see an opportunity to build a network of the best professionals and services in any given community to support the adolescent population. Having a team that can be called upon to staff weekend retreats, speak at programs, respond to crises, and help parents in need is something that can benefit all YSOs. Furthermore, shared help lines, telehealth services and other resources can be brought to bear through collective thinking and collaboration. As resources allow, we will begin these discussions in several of our biggest markets. To help with this, we will be leveraging the expertise of our volunteer *Wellness and Inclusion Advisory Council*, a group of experts across the field of health, wellness, and inclusion, to amplify and enhance the work happening in local communities.

3. Ensure that organizations are prepared to protect the young people they serve.

With a growing number of participants, more health and wellness issues, and the lingering impact of pandemic life, understanding the policies and procedures that organizations must have in place to protect the audiences they serve (as well as the organization itself) is more important than ever. The **BBYO Center for Adolescent Wellness** has been working to identify the best organizational practices in child mental, emotional, and social health and protection while using the past several months to systematically review and upgrade BBYO's internal practices in this area. The BBYO Center for Adolescent Wellness has developed an assessment tool that is now available to aid YSOs in evaluating their own organizational readiness to support mental health and wellness needs.

These three focus areas represent a critical path forward in creating best practices in adolescent health and wellness. We look forward to learning from and convening others in this space to develop opportunities for collaboration and leveraging financial resources in a way that allows our Jewish community to be a place where young people can thrive and do what we have done best throughout our history – care for one another through acts of love and kindness.

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